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6412 Westchester
Houston, TX 77005-3762
1 July 1999

Commissioner Jane E. Henney
Parklawn Building, Rm 14-71
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

Re: Antibiotic Use in Animal Feed

Dear Commissioner Henney,

We were deeply troubled after reading the enclosed article in Time magazine regarding the 19 million lbs of antibiotics which are fed to chickens, pigs, and cattle every year simply to make them grow faster.

This means that every time I serve my family a meal, the meat or poultry probably contains antibiotics that are passing into our bodies, and we will be developing a resistance towards them. What will happen if one day we might need those same antibiotics to treat a serious illness? There is a strong possibility that they will not be effective.

We are writing to ask you to do all you can to ban those antibiotics which are medically useful to humans from all future use in animal feed.

Very truly yours,

Eleanor DiFranco

Eleanor DiFranco

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as ladybugs and honeybees. Indeed, organic farmers have long used Bt sprays as a natural pesticide.

With hundreds of millions of dollars at stake, agritech companies aren't eager to draw sweeping conclusions from the Cornell experiments. "Obviously the work is preliminary and inconclusive," says Monsanto spokesman Randy Krotz, minimizing the possibility that corn pollen could ever be blown far enough to affect monarch habitats. But it was just such a discovery—of pollen-dusted milkweed 20 ft. from the edge of cornfields—that prompted Losey's study in the first place. Says

"We asked ourselves, 'What would happen if the milkweed would be dusted with Bt [corn pollen]?' His experiments quickly gave an answer: within four days, 44% of monarch larvae placed on the dusted leaves were dead, while controls survived unscathed."

Losey is eager to take the experiments into the field, to measure their density at various distances from their source so as to determine risk to monarch larvae at each site. Says Losey: "We have to weigh the costs and benefits [of Bt corn], then decide as a society what we want to do. But that decision may already have been made. The Bt gene is now regularly spread into potatoes (as protection against the Colorado potato beetle) and cotton (against the boll weevil)."

Five years after U.S. regulators approved the first genetically altered food crop, the "FlavrSavr" tomato, there are all manner of brave new foods on the way: beans and grains with more protein, caffeine-free coffee beans, strawberries packed with more natural sugars, and potatoes that cook up less fast during frying. At last count, says plant ecologist Allison Snow of Ohio State University, field trials have been conducted for some 50 gene-spliced food plants, including squash, melons, carrots, onions, peppers, apples and papayas.

But such tinkering can go awry. Even their proponents concede, splice genes, like any other genes, can be picked up by wild species. The fear is that they will create what geneticist Norm Ellstrand of the University of California at Riverside calls "a weedier weed"—a species, such as the superweed that turned up in France when sugar beets crossed accidentally with a wild relative, that is both harder to control and more ecologically disruptive. Scientists also fear that as use of Bt crops increases, so will resistance in the very insects they're aimed at, depriving organic farmers of a natural pesticide they'd come to rely on.

Measures are being considered to avert such calamities—for example, rotating cornfields with patches of plain,

fashioned corn so that not all pests become resistant. But these efforts haven't silenced critics, especially in Britain, where a noisy debate is raging over what the London tabloids like to call "Frankenstein foods." Last week the British Medical Association called for a moratorium on commercial planting of all transgenic crops until scientists agree on their safety. In India, Monsanto is running into a p.r. buzz saw in its efforts to get Bt cotton approved.

As it works with continuing

protests over its stalled plans to include in its new crops so-called terminator technology that would compel farmers to buy fresh seed for each planting.

Viewing the new crops as useful alternatives to pesticides, most scientists want work on them to continue, if more cautiously. The message from the monarchs, meanwhile, is that even the most well-intentioned biotechnologies are not

New York and Dick Thompson/Washington

MEDICINE

Drugged Chicks Hatch a Menace

More than 19 million lbs. of antibiotics are fed to cattle, pigs and chickens each year as they amble toward the dinner table. At the same time, doctors treating meat-eating humans have seen a steady and alarming increase in infections resistant to these same antibiotics. Is there a link? Scientists and consumer activists long suspected that there was but were never able to prove it.

Now they can. In the first study to connect antibiotic resistance in humans directly with the food we eat, a group of Minnesota public health specialists reported in last week's *New England Journal of Medicine* that an eightfold increase in drug-resistant food poisoning among Minnesotans directly followed the approval and use of the same drug in chickens. While most of their patients got sick while traveling overseas—where overuse of antibiotics is even more widespread than in the U.S.—the scientists found evidence that the same thing is happening right here at home.

To be certain that farm animals were the source of the problem, the scientists performed an experiment that mixed molecular genetics with shoe-leather detective work. First they decoded a unique stretch of the resistant bug's DNA, and then they went shopping. They bought 91 chickens in local markets and, by matching DNA, found that 14% were contaminated with exactly the same bug. Tracking the infections to the source, the scientists discovered that the birds

originated not from any single chicken farm but from farms across Minnesota and surrounding states—suggesting that the problem was widespread in the industry. Their conclusion: the antibiotic produced a resistant bug that was passed directly to consumers, probably through poor handling or undercooking. "[The link] is not hypothetical anymore," says Stuart Levy, director of Tufts University's center for drug resistance.

What makes the report especially disturbing is that the drug in question is a quinolone—one of a family of antibiotics that, with the spread of penicillin-resistant superbugs, have become the doctor's first line of defense. The U.S.

Food and Drug Administration considers the quinolones so important, in fact, that when the agency approved their use in animals in 1995, it insisted that their manufacturers establish a network to monitor for signs that drug resistance was spreading to humans. The monitoring programs of Abbott and Bayer, however, seem to have been less effective than Minnesota's, which was the first to notice that the chickens' antibiotics had come home to roost.



CHARLTON PHOTOS

After quinolones were approved for farm use, resistance in humans increased eightfold

Now that the link has been established, will the FDA cut off the supply of quinolones to animals? Not likely—or at least not right away. Although the FDA is currently forming a plan for pulling antibiotics off farms and ranches when human resistance develops, the agency has yet to establish how much resistance is too much. It may be months before such thresholds are set. Meanwhile, the best advice to consumers is to wash knives, cutting boards and hands after preparing chicken and insist that it be cooked thoroughly, especially when traveling abroad. —By Dick Thompson/Washington

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